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ABSTRACT

The thesis of this paper is that the main catalyst of religious interest of the counter culture has been the use of psychedelic drugs along with marijuana. The author determined, through investigating subjective experiences of an unselected population of 100 users of LSD type drugs and 20 users of cannabis drugs, that psychedelic drugs are mystical in their effect. The data were gathered by a questionnaire asking the respondent to compare his experiences under drugs with normal everyday experiences, ranking them in six degrees of intensity from "0 no different from normal" up to "5 - beyond anything ever experienced or imagined." Findings indicate that category 5, the most intense rating, was the mode of distribution for users of LSD type drugs, with cannabis users not so intense. All respondents rated positively at least some of the characteristics of profound religious experience. The findings suggest that the religion of the counter culture is not only a nonrational, pure experience of being but also rational in that interpretation of the experience builds a rational base, as in theology, for example. Although drugs may not be religious in themselves they can be a means of triggering a religious process. (SJM)

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THE PLACE OF DRUGS IN THE RELIGION OF THE COUNTER CULTURE

Walter Houston Clark

Perhaps the most vital, though most confused, expression of contemporary religion is to be found among the youth. Though this takes many forms, probably its main thrust is mystical in nature. The thesis of this paper is that the main catalyst of this religious interest of the counter culture has been the psychedelic or LSD-type drugs, though the wide use of marijuana also has been a factor. Though it had many forerunners, Timothy Leary was its John the Baptist. His disillusionment with the scientific and academic establishment led him to the conclusion that only the youth possessed the openness of mind, religious sensitivity, and spiritual drive to exploit the tools available to them in the psychedelic drugs. His dismissal from Harvard provided him with superb publicity with which to preach his message of "Don't trust anyone over 30;" "Turn on, tune in, and drop out!" Whatever one may think of the methods of Dr. Leary, there is no doubt but that he is a deeply religious person. His psychedelic evangelism persuaded hundreds of thousands and probably millions of youth to try the psychedelics.

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But how do we know that the effect of the psychedelic drugs is mystical? The late Dr. Walter N. Pahnke, ("Drugs and Mysticism" in B. Aaronson and H. Osmond, 1970) in a Harvard Study gave ten theological students psilocybin and ten others a placebo, then sent them all to a Good Friday service under double blind conditions. The experimental group reported many more characteristics of the

mystical state than did the controls. However, it might be objected that since these subjects were religiously motivated, the same results could not be expected from a less selected population.

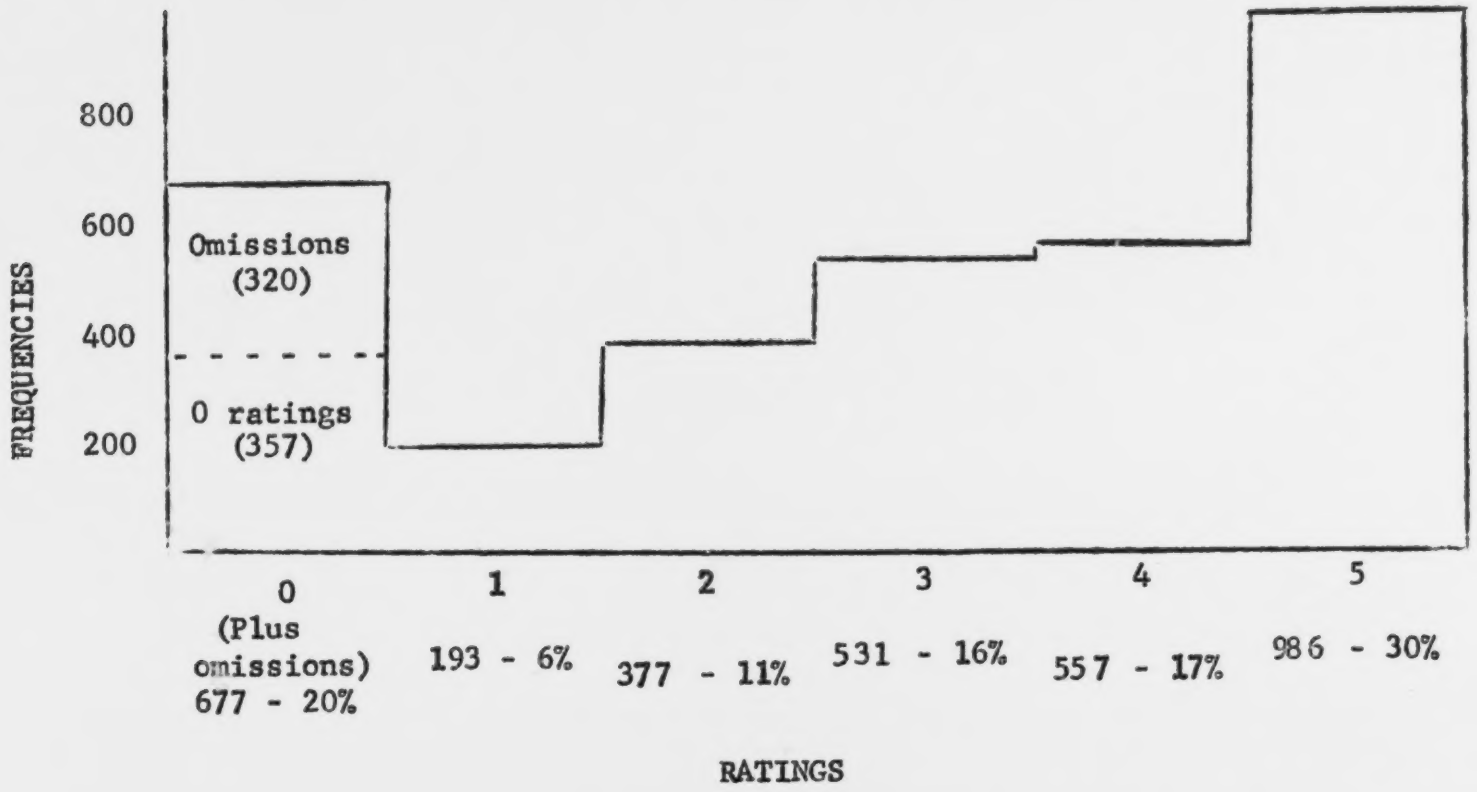
Though not as rigorously, I followed up Pahnke's results in an investigation of subjective experiences of an unselected population of 100 users of the LSD-type drugs and 20 users of cannabis drugs (marijuana and hashish). Of the LSD-type users the age range was 16-48 with 62% between 19 and 27; of the cannabis users the range was 16-39 with 60% between 19 and 27. Fifteen of these subjects were interviewed. The rest were not required to furnish their names in order that the study avoid arousing a not completely unjustified paranoia. Nearly fifty sheets of questionnaire responses in possession of a collaborator were seized by the police. A week or so later a respondent unwise enough gratuitously to append her name and address to one of the questionnaires was suddenly dismissed from her job with no explanation.

The data were gathered through a questionnaire asking the repondent to compare his experiences under the drugs with normal everyday experiences, ranking them under six degrees of intensity as follows: 0 - no different from normal; 1 - slightly above normal; 2 - clearly above normal; 3 - marked and intense; 4 - exceedingly intense; 5 - beyond anything ever experienced or imagined. Categories comprised areas associated with profound religious experience, for the most part mystical in nature, ending with "significance of the experiences." 33 Categories were printed. The respondents were

invited to suggest and rank additional categories. However, only a few additional categories and rankings were offered.

It might be expected that the extreme rating of 5 would be very rare. On the contrary a surprising finding of the study was that, for all categories, 5 was actually the mode of distribution for users of LSD-type drugs. With cannabis users 70% of the replies were positive (i.e. above 0) though in general not so intense. There was not a single respondent in either category who did not rate positively at least some of the characteristics of profound religious experience, though certainly there were some, though a minority, who would not have identified their experiences as religious. A summary graph of the distribution for LSD-type drug users is represented in the Figure.

FIGURE SUMMARY OF RATINGS OF 100 LSD-TYPE DRUG USERS OF SUBJECTIVE STATES ASSOCIATED WITH MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES COMPARED TO THESE SAME CATEGORIES UNDER NORMAL CONDITIONS



While the figure presents a generalized view that will pretty well fit most of the categories, a few of the latter are particularly interesting. At the same time they will illustrate the categories sampled. Among the categories that received a high percentage of 5 ratings or were otherwise interesting were (a) the loss of sense of self with consequent melting into your surroundings 35%; (b) sense of the cosmic 39%; (c) sense of being in touch with ultimate reality 40%; (d) sense of blessedness and peace 32%; (e) sense of the holy, the sacred, or the divine 30%; (f) sense of paradoxicality 24%; (g) sense of not being able to describe your experience 33%; (h) joy 43%; (i) sense of dying 31%; (j) feeling of rebirth 33%; (k) esthetic experience and sense of beauty 47%; (l) sense of learning, growth, and maturity 25% (only 13% omitted this item or ranked it 0); (m) effect was an increase in your sympathies and compassion 24% (18% omitted or ranked this 0); (n) music moved you 43%; (o) a sense of timelessness 27%; (p) significance of the session 50% (one ranking of 0 and 12 omissions).

The full tabulation on the ranking of "experience of God" is especially interesting. 21% 0, 4% 1, 5% 2, 4% 3, 11% 4, and 32% 5. Apparently drug users include a number of those who have rejected conventional religion and its symbolism. Hence they hesitate to identify their experiences as "an experience of God". Yet many of these same individuals will rank very similar or identical experiences as beyond anything ever experienced or imagined. For example the total distribution of rankings on the category of "sense of being in

touch with ultimate reality," which most reasonably sophisticated intellectuals would identify as religious, went as follows: 13% omissions, 4% 0, 6% 1, 8% 2, 14% 3, 17% 4, and 40% 5. It is quite clear that to get at the bottom of this somewhat tortured analysis, a thorough semantic study is in order. But it is equally clear that this sample from the counter culture is reporting exceedingly intense and moving subjective experiences associated with psychedelic drug use, and in doing so is willing to accept many of the terms associated with mystically religious states of mind.

Although one cannot be absolutely sure that the distribution secured in the graph is not an artifact in whole or in part, it strongly suggests a bimodal distribution with normal states of mind to the left and ecstatic or completely different states at the right. This speculation is strongly supported by a consideration of the wording of the ranking categories. When an area was perceived as departing from the normal at all there was a strong tendency to rank it as "beyond anything experienced or even imagined." Obviously such states would be difficult to describe to anyone who had not participated in them. This is reminiscent of William James' comments on his experience under nitrous oxide in the lecture on mysticism in THE VARIETIES (N.Y.: Longmans, Green, 1902, p. 388):

> One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. ...No account of the universe in its totality can be final that leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.

We can also understand the ageless complaint of the mystics that explaining a mystical experience to one who has never had one is like trying to explain sight to one who was born blind. One third of 100 respondents ranked the ineffability of the experience as 5.

Such findings give us clues to the religion of the counter culture. This is not to say that all expressions of religion in the counter culture is drug related. We have no exact figures, and there is no doubt but that a great deal of it is not. But there has been no single agency more potent in introducing youth to the mystical aspects of religion than the psychedelic drugs.

But even when youth have used the psychedelics there are few facile generalizations to apply to all users. However, in general, the more serious the motivation of experimenters who try the drugs the more likely is a wholesome and full-blown mystical experience. The more frivolous and superficial the motivation, the less likely a religious result even though there are present--as is nearly always the case--some subjectivities associated with religious experience. Quite often, especially among the younger experimenters, it is the desire to go with the crowd--and outdo it if possible--the craving for mere excitement, and the expression of vague feelings of rebellion that govern the movement and cause much shaking of greyer heads. But those same grey heads have little knowledge of the drug experience and, influenced by the media, the police, ignorant psychiatrists, and others who, like the fat boy in Pickwick, want to make their flesh creep, take alarm. They make the gross mistake, while sipping their

cocktails, of lumping the psychedelics with heroin, or even alcohol, when they generalize their own experiences with a drug to all the others. In considering the effects of drugs there is nothing more needed than the capacity of discriminating the effects of one from another.

I think I am putting the matter conservatively and responsibly when I say that there are many users of the psychedelics, especially with proper set and setting, who experience profound religious experience of a mystical nature. The result is the "opening up" of the spiritual dimension so that the individual, often much to his surprise, becomes aware that he too is a spiritual being. Thus the drug is truly "mind revealing," as the literal meaning of the word "psychedelic" suggests.

But it must not be thought that the experience is in any sense "theological" in the rational connotation of the term. It is essentially nonrational and is best nourished when the individual relaxes and completely gives himself up to the experience when it begins, with his mind as completely free from presuppositions and discursive thoughts as possible. Critical appraisal is important but should come later. Essentially the individual is involved in pure experience, "being" without space and without time and with all form and all discrimination melted into a perceptual unity. In this sense this type of religious experience becomes the romantic element in religion, the center from which drive, desire, vitality, and motivation spring. This is its function. On the other hand it is

the psyche's rational element that provides religion's form. From the rational springs the interpretation of the experience, theology for example, which then builds the rational base from which springs religious dogma, creed, and the religious institutions built upon them.

Likewise these drug induced experiences increase sensitivity to the environment and particularly the world of nature. People take on added significance, and there is a tendency for strong affectional bonds to be forged between those who take the drugs together or between the drug-taker and his "guide." But there is also a tendency to conceive a generalized concern for all of mankind that evolves from the perception that all men participate in the same essential nature and the same fate. This helps to explain the talk of love one so frequently hears amond the flower children. It also helps to explain the movement of youth into communes, where they can express this urge toward closeness with those who have had similar experiences and so share certain values.

These values are often those mouthed by representatives of institutional religion but seldom taken very seriously by the faithful. For example, good Christians are often enjoined to "lay not up treasures upon earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and thieves break through and steal." But middle class parents, beside laying up for themselves whatever earthly treasures they can, are apt to become highly disturbed when they discover their sons and daughters putting into actual practice that scriptural admonition. The latter

is an illustration of how principles and values that have long been intellectually accepted suddenly become emotionally accepted as the result of a religious experience involving psychological mechanisms at a far deeper level than is usually the case. The resulting radical change of behavior has often been noted following intense religious experience. The power of the early Quakers and Methodists as well as Hasidic Judaism was built upon it. A similar power and vitality is being demonstrated among certain of the elements of the counter culture.

But if the counter culture has owed much of its vitality to the nonrational religious experience released by the drugs, this alone has not been sufficient to engender a viable lifestyle. For example, the many communes fostered by the drug have been notorious for their short lives. They are most apt to last when the need for discipline has been recognized or when they have looked about them and seen needs of the wider community that they can serve. Furthermore, many individuals have come to realize that the drugs are simply means to ends, and over periods of time there is a strong tendency to give them up in favor of non-drug methods of keeping their religion alive such as regular meditation, music, ritual, or the dance. Some, though not many, return to the religion of their earlier days.

Sometimes these individuals have a refreshing and liberalizing influence on conventionalized religion. Some contemporary liturgical reforms have owed something to counter-culture tastes. On the other hand still others may return to the tradition and to middle-class

social ideals with a vengeance, insisting on literalizing scripture, living a Spartan life, and arrogantly holding as lost souls all who do not agree with them. Though one may admire their force and sincerity, this criticism at least partly applies to the Jesus Freaks. Many of these have been introduced to an intense religious life through the drugs, but in giving them up denounce all drug taking with a self righteous superiority. They remind one of James' words:

> ....when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. (Op. Cit., p. 337)

But it is also fair to mention a reverse type of orthodoxy among users of drugs to the effect that they insist that no religion can exist without them.

For those who remember their chemistry, a catalyst is a chemical that facilitates a chemical reaction without entering into the chemical process itself. Thus the drugs themselves are not religious in themselves but simply a means of starting a religious process. As one youth put it, the drugs open a door but do not supply one with a room to live in. Once one has gone through the door he is not apt to do so for long without discovering that eventually the process will yield diminishing returns. This at least has been my observation of many although one cannot say that a limited ongoing participation in drugs for religious purposes may not be effective with some, like the peyote Indians or Castaneda's Don Juan.

The true and essential ingredients of religious experience are, first of all, the capacity for such experience lodged deeply at the

base of personality the expression of which is the most captivating and transforming of all human experience. Associated with this is the capacity to experience beauty in all its forms both in the world of nature and in its contrived cultural forms. Once the urge to secure the basic necessities of staying alive are satisfied the unconscious urges to express these nonrational hungers assert themselves. It is out of this matrix that the true ingredients of religious experience appear. It is because they are there that drugs possessing the generalized power of sharpening all human perceptions can release them in intense form so that, as I have demonstrated, individuals will describe their expression as "beyond anything ever experienced or even imagined." Ingesters then perceive themselves in a radically new light. They leave their families, their previous ambitions, their former ways of life in order to "seek God," or the equivalent of that expression, to find an alternative in a new way of life that will bring them nearer an ultimate meaning.

Many may be confused and lacking in discipline, as I have already pointed out, but they offer to our worn out religious institutions a verve and a dimension that is sadly needed but that more often is spurned than understood and welcomed. Also there are many who approach the drugs with the utmost seriousness and sense of responsibility, who discipline themselves and link their drug use to their concern for society. Here I must reiterate my statement that not every participant in the religion of the counter culture uses or even has used drugs. There is no feature of profound religious experience that

has not expressed itself without their agency in one person or another today or through the ages. Maybe countercultural religion would be a more wholesome thing without the drugs. However, I have come across so many who have told me that they would not have become aware of their religious needs apart from the drugs that I feel that I am on firm ground in stating that they have been the most important single factor mediating the religion of the counter culture. For the long range effect on religion in general and on the culture as a whole we must wait critically and yet with open minds. This is just one way in which the psychedelics have already become important social tools and deserve the attention of students of religion.

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